

BURIED PAST

Development proposal for a one-hour film

Hank Avery immigrated from Pennsylvania to Canada to avoid being sent to Vietnam in 1971. He was part of the second great wave of people who have fled the U.S. The first was the Underground Railway, which made it possible for 30,000 slaves to escape to Canada prior to the Civil War. Headquarters of the Underground Railway happened to be in Pennsylvania.

Upon arrival, Avery found Quebec to be a welcoming place. He finished a degree in education at Concordia, found a job as an elementary school teacher in the Eastern Townships, married a French-Canadian woman, and had two children.

But a few years ago, Avery began to discover a dark side of Canadian history.

Near his home town of Durham, Quebec, on the edge of a road that runs past the Benoit farm, there is a tomb-stone with the name Colonel Philip Luke inscribed on it. He was a United Empire Loyalist who first cleared and settled the Benoit farm in 1781. Far behind the Benoit house, invisible from the road, is a slab of black limestone rock which stands up 6 metres high, and extends for 30 metres. It is known in the area as "Nigger Rock", the place where Col. Luke's slaves buried 30 of their dead.

In the fall of 1996, rumours began to spread around the Durham area that farmer Benoit had scooped land from the foot of Nigger Rock to shore up a barn, and that he had found human remains. Avery asked Iris Gurthrie, a 94-year-old neighbour of his, to tell him more about the Rock. Guthrie told him that she had played on it as a child, that there was an open lane leading to it, and that at the bottom of it there was a mound with a metal sign next to it reading "Negro cemetery". Around 1950, farmer Benoit shut off access to the lane, removed the sign, and leveled the mound while building a road to a stand of prime lumber at the back of his property.

Avery was shocked, began looking into whether farmer Benoit had broken any law forbidding the desecration of graves, and started studying the history of slavery in Canada.

He found out that hundreds, maybe thousands, of slaves were brought into Canada by the United Empire Loyalists, that slaves did most of the harsh work clearing land, that they were housed in segregated shanty-towns similar to the ones they had left behind in the U.S., and that they were buried in un-marked graves. When slavery began to be abolished by the legislatures of British North America in the early 19th century, almost all freed slaves chose to leave their masters and look for work as tradespeople and labourers in the cities.

Avery also found out that almost all burial grounds in Canada for UEL slaves had suffered the same fate as Nigger Rock, and had lost their identity. The only two burial grounds that remained marked on the site were in Birchtown, Nova Scotia, and Priceville, Ontario. He felt an obligation, as the descendant of slaves himself, to do whatever he could to "find peace for the souls of these departed brothers and sisters."

He arranged a meeting between farmer Benoit and Dan Philip, President of the Black Coalition of Quebec. Philip asked Benoit to make the Rock accessible to the public again. Benoit refused, claiming that the Rock got its name from its black colour, not from any black people having been buried there. So Avery checked with the Quebec Toponymy Commission, and found that it was listed in the Commission's registry as "Rocher Nigger, where a landowner buried his slaves in the 18th century." He also made a serious search for the missing "Negro cemetery" sign, and found it in the ruins of a stone barn near Dunham.

Avery made an appeal to the town council of Saint-Armand, within whose boundaries the Benoit farm is located. This caused such a storm in the town council that it made Avery wonder whether it would ever be safe for him to travel down the back roads of Saint-Armand again.

He decided to go to the press. Stories in Montreal papers and on local television stations have appeared over the past two years. As a result, offers of help have come in from people like lawyer David Scholtz, ombudsman Dawn Ducette, investment counselor John Leblanc, computer programmer Francis Scarder, radio broadcaster Edgar Gay, historian Dorothy Williams, and Edina Bayne, President of Black History Month.

They are trying (1) to persuade the Quebec government to designate the rock as a historical site, and to change its name to Slave Rock, and (2) to persuade the local Missisquoi Historical Museum to take on the responsibility of re-installing the missing sign, putting a fence around the area, and restoring an access lane for the public. But everything is stalled because of the resistance of farmer Benoit and the town council of Saint-Armand.

Here is an opportunity to build a film around a lively story that would cast light on a buried part of Canada's past. Hank Avery is a very attractive central character. He is a much-respected grade 3 teacher, an amateur actor and soul-singer with a lovely voice, and an articulate and passionate story teller, in his own gentle way. The film would focus on Avery and his supporters waging their campaign to "bring peace to the souls" who were buried at Slave Rock.

I would need one month for research and scripting.